Ministry of Housing,
Communities &
Local Government

Paying the Right Level of Council Tax

A Plain English Guide to Council Tax in England

May 2019
Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government

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Ministerial foreword

“No-one likes paying more Council Tax than they should, but Council Tax is necessary for the functioning of government and the common good. And yet, as citizens we have a right to know about the rules which govern how local taxes are calculated and collected in plain, clear language.

This government guide – the first ever – is intended to do just that. It gives advice on how your council tax bill is set, and how you can check that you are not paying more than you should. I hope it is useful in providing practical assistance, set out in plain English.”

Rt Hon James Brokenshire MP

Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government

What is council tax?

Council tax is a tax paid to your local council(s) for the delivery of local services. It generally needs to be paid in respect of all domestic properties where people live permanently.

Your council tax bill will depend on what council tax band your property is placed in and the level of council tax set each year by your local council.

There are eight bands – from A to H – based on the value of the property. The highest paying band is Band H, with the amounts levied going down progressively to the lowest paying band, Band A. The council tax band of your property is decided by the Valuation Office Agency.

In ‘two tier areas’ (where there is both a district and county council), your council tax bill will be issued by the district council. In ‘single tier areas’ it will be issued by a unitary council, a metropolitan district council or a London borough. Your bill will show how much of your council tax goes to which local public bodies, for example, police and crime commissioners, and parish/town councils. It will also show how much each element of the bill has increased or decreased since the last year’s bill.

This guide provides an introduction to the council tax system in England. Separate arrangements apply in Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland. More information on how council tax is set and by whom is provided under “Having your say on what you pay” later in this guide.

This document should not be considered to be definitive legal advice. It is intended as an overview of how council tax operates, as at the date of publication in May 2019. Guidance and advice on how your personal circumstances affect your liability for council tax is available from your local billing authority, which is responsible for administering the council tax system in accordance with the relevant legislation.

Who is liable to pay council tax?

You usually have to pay council tax if you are 18 or over and own or rent a home. While council tax is normally paid by the person living in a property, there are a few circumstances where the owner is responsible for paying council tax. These include:

- Empty homes.
- Nursing homes and other similar homes.
- Houses of religious communities.
- Houses in multiple occupation (where rooms are let individually).
- Residences of staff who live in houses which are also occupied by an employer.
- Residences of ministers of religion.

If you are a tenant and think your landlord or somebody else should be paying council tax rather than you, you should contact your local council and seek advice.

Usually at least one person over 18 living at a property is liable to pay council tax. However, if you are living with someone as a couple, whether you are married, cohabiting or in a civil partnership, you are responsible for the bill as a couple but also individually, regardless of whose name is on the bill.

If a number of people live in a property, there is a process for determining the order of liability.

The order goes as follows:

- A resident owner-occupier who is the freeholder of all or part of the property,
- A resident owner-occupier who is the leaseholder of all or part of the property,
- A resident tenant,
- A resident who lives in the property and who is not a tenant, but has permission to stay there,
- Any other resident living in the property,
- A mortgagee in possession of an owner's interest, and then
- An owner of the property where no one is resident.

If you move in, your council tax liability is calculated on a daily basis.

Am I entitled to a reduced council tax bill?

The council tax system provides support to help people in various circumstances or who might otherwise struggle to pay. There are many discounts and exemptions that can be applied to council tax.

Generally, if a council tax exemption applies, no council tax will need to be paid on the property. If an exemption doesn't apply, but you qualify for a discount or disregard, you will receive a reduced bill.

In some circumstances, it may be possible for your council to backdate any discount or exemption.

Council tax exemptions

A number of different categories of people and properties are exempt from council tax altogether and the following section summarises the available exemptions. Again, these apply to all councils unless indicated.

People-based exemptions

Students

Households where everyone is a full-time student do not have to pay council tax. To count as a full-time student, your course must normally last at least one year and involve at least 21 hours study per week. If you study for a qualification up to A-level and you are under 20, your course must last at least three months and involve at least 12 hours study per week. The exemption extends to students' spouses or dependents who are not British citizens, and who are prevented by the terms of their entry visa from taking paid employment or from claiming benefit.

If you are a full-time student and share a property with one or more people who are not full-time students, then they will need to pay the council tax bill. However, because students are not counted for council tax, if you are not a full-time student but share a property solely with one or more people who are full-time students, you may be able to qualify for the single person discount, which reduces the bill by 25%.

Halls of residence for students are exempt from council tax as long as the accommodation is owned or managed by an educational establishment (such

as a college or university), or where an educational establishment nominates the majority of the student residents. The accommodation must be provided predominantly for students, which does not prevent part of the accommodation being used for staff or other people.

If you are a student and own a home that you have to leave unoccupied in order to study, then the home you own may also be exempt from council tax for as long as you remain a student.

Armed forces

Living accommodation for UK armed forces owned by the Ministry of Defence (MoD) is exempt from council tax whether it is occupied or not.

This includes barracks and other accommodation on military bases, together with married quarters, as long as this accommodation is held for the purposes of forces accommodation.

The MoD does however charge their residents contributions in lieu of council tax, which are paid to the local authority. These contributions are calculated and administered by the MoD and are set to broadly match the amount of council tax which would otherwise have been payable.

As noted below (page 15), if you are a member of the armed services, you may be entitled to receive a discount of 50% where your main job-related accommodation is provided by the MoD in Great Britain as part of your posting.

Properties are also exempt if the occupier is associated with a visiting overseas force. A dwelling may also be exempt if any one of the persons who would be liable to pay the council tax is associated with a visiting force.

People that have moved into a care home or hospital

Your home will usually be exempt from council tax when it is unoccupied because you have moved into a residential care home, nursing home, hospital or hostel in which you are receiving care or treatment and is now your main residence.

To qualify for the exemption, you must have been living at the care home or hospital since you moved out of your old home and will qualify for the exemption as long as you stay there. There is no time limit for this exemption.

People that are living with somebody else to receive care and live-in carers

Your home is exempt from council tax if it is empty because you have had to leave the property permanently to live elsewhere to receive care.

In order to qualify for this exemption, you must require care for one of the following reasons:

- Old age,
- Disability,
- Illness,
- Past or present alcohol or drug dependence,
- Past or present mental disorder

You must have left the property to receive care elsewhere (other than in a hospital, care home, or hostel), and cannot have moved anywhere else in between leaving the property and moving in to receive that care.

Similarly, if you have left your home empty to provide live-in care for someone needing care for the reasons set out above, it may be exempt from council tax.

People with a severe mental impairment

Council tax exemptions are available for people with a severe mental impairment to intelligence and social functioning, which appears to be permanent. Conditions that might cause a severe mental impairment could include, for example, dementia. You must have a medical certificate from a doctor and show that you are entitled to (but not necessarily in receipt of) one of a number of specific benefits. Your local council will be able to advise on the list of benefits that qualify.

If a property is only occupied by people who are classed as severely mentally impaired, it is exempt from council tax. The effect of this exemption is that the normal 50% council tax charge incurred when a group of “disregarded” individuals live together does not apply.

If you have a severe mental impairment and share your home with one other person who would normally have to pay council tax, there will be a single person discount applied to the bill.

You also are not counted for council tax if you are a live-in carer looking after someone who isn’t your partner, spouse, or child under 18.

Diplomats

A dwelling is exempt from council tax if at least one person who would be liable to pay has diplomatic privileges and immunities, provided that they are not:

- A British citizen or British subject or a permanent resident of the United Kingdom; and
- There is no other dwelling in the UK that is the main residence of that person.

Bankruptcy

Where the person who would be liable to the council tax in respect of an unoccupied property is a trustee in bankruptcy, it will normally be exempt. The exemption applies whether the unoccupied dwelling is furnished or not, and avoids charges being incurred by the trustee which cannot be met from the estate of the bankrupt individual. There is no time limit for this exemption.

People detained or in prison

You are exempt from council tax if your property is empty because you are:

- Detained in prison or hospital by order of a court.
- Detained prior to deportation.
- Detained under the Mental Health Act 1983.
- Subject to military imprisonment.

If you are detained for non-payment of council tax or a fine, you will not qualify for this exemption.

Property-based exemptions

Death of a sole occupant and probate

When a property becomes empty after the death of the owner, the property is exempt from council tax for as long as it remains unoccupied and until probate is granted.

Following a grant of probate, a further six months exemption is possible as long as the property remains unoccupied and has not been sold or transferred to someone else. However, the full council tax due will need to be paid by the executors of the estate at the end of this period.

If you are the beneficiary of a will and have inherited a property, you may wish to discuss liability for council tax with your solicitor as the interaction of council tax and inheritance law is complex and depends on the particular circumstances.

Repossessed property

This exemption applies to unoccupied properties where there is a default on repayment of the mortgage and the mortgage lender repossesses the property. It applies from the date that the owners vacate the property, and the mortgage lender takes possession.

There is no time limit for this exemption.

Property that cannot be inhabited

An empty and unfurnished property is exempt from council tax if its occupation is:

- Restricted by a planning condition that prevents occupancy.
- Prohibited by law, for example because it is unfit for human habitation.
- Kept unoccupied as a result of statutory action to prohibit occupation, or with a view to compulsory purchase.

The exemption does not apply if the property is occupied illegally, for example, squatting.

Unoccupied properties owned by charities

A property owned by a charity is exempt from council tax if it is unoccupied and has been so for a period of less than six months, and was last occupied for the purposes of the charity.

Empty property for clergy

Unoccupied dwellings that are available for a minister of religion as a residence from which he or she will perform the duties of their office are exempt from council tax. The exemption applies to a property being held for a minister of any religious denomination. There is no time limit for this exemption.

Empty caravan and boat moorings

Pitches that are not occupied by a caravan, or moorings that are not occupied by boats are exempt from council tax until a caravan or boat is moved to the pitch or mooring. The person living in the caravan or boat would then be liable for council tax if it is their sole or main residence.

Council tax discounts

The majority of discounts are set nationally and apply for all English councils. In addition, some locally-set discounts may also be available. Unless this guide indicates that a particular discount is subject to local discretion, it should be available to all eligible council taxpayers in England.

Single Person Discount

The Single Person Discount recognises that single adults make a reduced personal use of local services, whilst still benefiting from services that protect and enhance their property (like fire cover, street lighting, etc).

A full council tax bill is based on at least two adults living in a home. Adults are those aged 18 or over. You get 25% off your bill if you live on your own, or you live with someone who is not counted (‘disregarded’) for the purposes of council tax.

For example, a single parent with children over the age of 18 would receive 25% off their council tax bill.

You do not pay more if you have more than two adults living there.

‘Disregarded’ people

You will usually get a 50% discount if nobody living in your home, including you, is ‘counted’ for council tax.

The following categories of people are usually not counted (or ‘disregarded’) for council tax:

- People under the age of 18.
- 18 or 19 year olds who are at or have just left school.

- Full-time students, student nurses, youth training trainees and apprentices.
- Non-British spouses, partners or dependents of a student.
- People whose main home is a hospital, care home, hospice, hostel or night shelter.
- Severely mentally impaired people.
- Care workers living with the person receiving care.
- People caring for someone with a disability who is not a spouse, partner or child under 18.
- Members of visiting armed forces and some international institutions.
- Members of religious communities that have limited income.
- People detained in prison or under the Mental Health Acts (except those in prison for non-payment of council tax or a fine).

If you fit into one of those categories but are not sure if you might be entitled to a discount, then contact your local council and seek advice. A council may not know about your right to a discount unless you tell them.

If a property is solely made up of occupying residents who are exempt (for example, full-time students), then there is no council tax payable.

Disabled band reduction scheme

You may be eligible for a reduction in the council tax banding of your property if you live in a larger property than you would otherwise need because you or another occupant are disabled. To be eligible, you need to show you have either:

- An extra bathroom, kitchen or other room that you need for the disabled person.
- Extra space inside the property for using a wheelchair.

The property must be the main home of at least one disabled person. This can be an adult or a child - it doesn’t have to be the person responsible for paying council tax.

If you apply for the reduction and these criteria are met, then your council tax bill is reduced to the amount payable for a home in the valuation band below yours. If you are in the lowest band already (Band A) you get a reduction of one sixth of the bill.

Annexes: Family discount

Annexes to homes are generally subject to a separate council tax bill. However, if you have an annexe to your home you may be able to obtain a 50% discount on your council tax bill for the annexe if you are using the annexe as part of your main home.

If you live in an annexe as your main home, you may get a 50% discount on your council tax bill if you are a relative of the person who is responsible for paying council tax on the main property.

Annexes: ‘Granny annexe’ exemption

In addition**,** an annexe will be fully exempt (which means you don’t have to pay council tax) if it has a dependant relative living in it as their main, or only, home. A relative is dependant if they are:

- Aged 65 or over,
- Substantially or permanently disabled, or
- Severely mentally impaired.

An exemption may also be granted where an annexe is empty and cannot be let separately without a breach of planning permission. This exemption can be granted regardless of whether the property is furnished or not, and continues as long as nobody is living in the annexe.

An annexe would also not be liable for council tax if it was occupied by someone under the age of 18, or who was in full-time education.

Second home discount

Local discounts: Councils have discretion on how to apply council tax to second homes. These are furnished properties that you own for your personal use but are not your ‘main or sole’ residence. Councils can offer a discount of up to 50% in such cases, but they can also require that the full council tax bill applies – it is up to your council to decide.

National discount: In certain cases, the 50% discount cannot be reduced by your council. In particular, the 50% discount needs to be applied where a second home is left empty if you are required by your employer to move elsewhere for job-related purposes. This might apply, for example, if you are a member of the armed services and you are required to move into Ministry of Defence accommodation in Great Britain as part of your posting.

Empty properties

If you own an empty home, you will usually have to pay council tax, but your council has the discretion to offer a local discount. These are at a level determined by the council, and may only be for a short period. Contact your council to find out whether they offer a discount on an empty property.

You may get a local discount if your home is undergoing major repair work or structural changes, for example your walls are being rebuilt. You should contact your council to find out whether there is a discount available.

Some homes are not subject to council tax for as long as they stay empty. They include certain homes subject to an exemption (see below), for example homes that:

- Have been repossessed.
- Can't be lived in by law, for example if they're unfit for habitation.
- Are empty because they've been compulsory purchased and will be demolished.

If you consider your property is derelict or uninhabitable, you may ask the Valuation Office Agency to remove it from the council tax valuation list. If the Valuation Office Agency agrees to do so, the property will no longer be subject to council tax.

Your council will tell you when you have to start paying council tax if you've been carrying out major home improvements on an empty property or building a new property. You will receive a 'completion notice' that tells you the date you must start paying council tax.

An empty home is not eligible for a Single Person Discount.

Long-term empty properties

If you own a residential property that has been empty and unfurnished for more than two years, the council has the power to add a premium to the council tax bill to encourage you to bring the home back into use. This can be up to 100% extra on top of the normal council tax. From April 2020, this premium can be increased to 200% if the property has been empty for over five years and, from April 2021, to 300% if the property has been empty for over ten years.

The time frame applies to the property, not the ownership, so you may want to ask your solicitor to clarify how long a property has been empty if you are considering a purchase (but not immediately moving in).

The Government has issued guidance to councils on the application of the empty homes premium to help councils apply it consistently and fairly in a range of circumstances that may to lead to properties being empty. This guidance will be revised and updated before the introduction of the 200% premium.

Support to people on low incomes

Each council that bills for council tax must have a local scheme to provide support to people who might have difficulty paying. Councils often refer to these as their council tax support or reduction scheme. This support comes in the form of a partial or full discount from your council tax. The amount of council tax support you will get depends on a number of factors, including:

- Your age,
- The benefits you and/or your partner receive,
- Your income,
- Your savings,
- The people that live with you, and
- Whether you receive a disability or carers benefit.

If you think that you might be eligible for local council tax support, you should contact your council. While schemes are the responsibility of each council, some of the key features are set out below.

Support for pensioners (nationwide scheme)

There is a minimum level of support for pensioners who have reached state pension age that all local councils must provide. If you are among the lowest-income pensioners, for example if you receive the guarantee credit part of pension credit, you may not have to pay any council tax at all. If you only receive the savings part of pension credit or have a low income and £16,000 or less in savings, you may still receive a discount.

Local support for working age people

While there is no nationally specified minimum level of council tax support for working age people, each council is required to have a scheme to help people in financial need. You should check with your local council to see what support they offer and how to apply.

Hardship Relief

If you're experiencing exceptional hardship for reasons beyond your control, you could qualify for help to temporarily reduce your council tax bill. This is available at the discretion of your council.

You should contact your council to establish how they might assess an application. You may need to demonstrate, for example, that:

- The amount of money you have coming in is a lot less than your outgoings and you have no savings; or
- There are personal circumstances that prevent you from paying,
- You have applied for all other help such as benefits and reductions,
- You do not have access to any other assets that could be used to pay the council tax bill.

Council tax valuations

Council tax valuations and bands are based on how much a property was worth on 1 April 1991. If your property was built more recently, it is valued on the basis of what it would have been worth on that date. Valuations are carried out by the Valuation Office Agency, which is a government agency that is independent of councils.

You might be able to challenge your council tax band if you have evidence that suggests that the band is wrong. However, before formally submitting a challenge, you should contact the Valuation Office Agency to explain why you think your band is wrong. You must be able to provide evidence.
The Valuation Office Agency may be able to review and change your band without you needing to challenge it. Further information on this process can be found on the gov.uk website: https://www.gov.uk/challenge-council-tax-band. You can contact the Valuation Office Agency by phone on 03000 501 501.

Formal challenge to your council tax band

If the Valuation Office Agency has reviewed your band and you do not agree with their decision, you can still submit a formal 'challenge' to your band. If you wish to do so, you should ensure that you submit your challenge within six months of moving into your property.

To submit a formal challenge, you should take the following steps:

- Find your property's council tax band on the valuation list. The valuation list can be found at: https://www.gov.uk/council-tax-bands and will also be shown on your council tax bill.
- From 'council tax band details' choose 'Do you think this council tax band is wrong?'
- From 'If you think your council tax band is wrong' choose 'Check if you can formally challenge your council tax band'.
- Answer the questions on the checklist to find out if you can make a challenge.
- Select 'Make a formal challenge to your council tax band' to fill in the challenge form.
- Provide evidence that supports your challenge in the 'Formal challenge details' section.

You will get a decision within four months. If you disagree with the Valuation Office Agency's decision, you can submit an appeal to the Valuation Tribunal. If you decide to do this, you must submit your appeal within three months of the decision by the Valuation Office Agency.You must continue paying your council tax while the challenge is happening. Information on how to submit an appeal to the Valuation Tribunal is available at their website: https://www.valuationtribunal.gov.uk/your-appeal-type/council-tax/council-tax-banding/.

If you moved into your home more than six months ago and think that it is wrongly banded, you can still contact the Valuation Office Agency who may be able to carry out an informal 'review' if you have the necessary evidence.

If you do decide to challenge your council tax band, there is a possibility that the property was previously valued less than it should be, and it could be placed in a higher council tax band as a consequence. Please bear this in mind before submitting a review.

Improving your property

If you carry out improvements to your property that increase its value, those improvements do not change the council tax band and you will pay the same council tax as they would before the renovations.

This is intentional, to stop council tax becoming a tax on home improvements. Significant improvements are considered when the house is sold.

The council tax band may change if the house is sold or the subject of a new lease for a period of more than seven years. In these cases, the council tax band will be reviewed by the Valuation Office Agency taking into account all changes to the property since council tax was introduced in 1993, or since it was last sold. Transfers between spouses on divorce do not trigger a review of the council tax banding.

The Valuation Office Agency maintain the council tax list. The Valuation Office Agency marks all properties that they know have been improved and has a band review pending with an (i) next to the property. You can view the council tax list on the Valuation Office Agency website at: www.voa.gov.uk.

If you are thinking about moving, you may wish to check the council tax list to see if the property you are thinking about purchasing has a band review pending and if it does, contact the Valuation Office Agency for advice. Any increase in council tax will be effective from the date that the council tax

valuation list is altered. However, this does not necessarily mean that the band will increase, as this will depend on the extent of the alterations and other factors.

Other material changes in circumstances

If you think that the value of your property has reduced, for example as a result of partial demolition, or due to a deterioration in the nearby environment, you should contact the Valuation Office Agency as soon as possible. If the value of the property has reduced sufficiently for it to be moved into a lower band, re-banding can take place after investigation without the property being sold. If a property is being entirely rebuilt, it should be removed from the council tax list for the duration of the rebuild.

New homes

When a new property has been built, or an existing property is converted to domestic use (for example, a warehouse conversion), the property will need to have a council tax band.

If you've moved into a new home that doesn't have a council tax band, you should contact your local council who will provide the Valuation Office Agency with the information they need to allocate a band.

The date on which a new property becomes subject to council tax is specified in a completion notice issued by the council. Where a domestic property is structurally complete, or where the work remaining can reasonably be expected to be completed within three months, a completion notice is served on the owner of the property. The owner may initially be the property developer until the property is sold.

If the property is already complete, the council will serve a completion notice on the owner as soon as is reasonably practicable. A completion notice cannot be backdated, even if the property has been completed for some time.

If you disagree with a completion notice you should appeal within 28 days of the date of service of the notice to the Valuation Tribunal Service. The appeal must be made in writing, stating the grounds for the appeal, and should be accompanied by a copy of the completion notice that has been issued to you. You may wish to contact your council first, setting out the reasons why you disagree with the date of completion.

Paying your bill

Your yearly council tax bill tells you:

- How much you have to pay for the year.
- How that amount has been worked out.
- The dates when payments are due.

The cost of council tax is usually split into 10 monthly payments. If you are having any trouble paying, you should contact your council as soon as possible. They may be able to help, for example by making your aware of any support that might be available.

If you wish, you have a legal right to ask to spread your payments over 12 months instead of 10. This can help with your cash flow, as you pay your annual bill in smaller monthly payments.

Payments can generally be made online to your council. Your council must not apply any surcharges to your bill if you pay by credit or debit card. You should be able to pay by direct debit if you wish, in which case your payments will be subject to the Direct Debit Guarantee.

Check your bill to find more detail on how to make payments to your council.

When things go wrong

If you miss a monthly payment or do not respond to a bill, your council will send you a reminder notice giving you seven days to pay. If you don’t pay within seven days or make an effort to contact the council, you may have to pay the whole year’s council tax instead.

If you miss a second council tax payment, you will be sent a second reminder notice. You will only get a maximum of two reminder notices in a financial year - this runs from April 1 to March 31 of the next year.

If you continue not to respond to council communications, you may receive a final notice saying you must pay the whole year’s council tax if you miss a payment for the third time.

If you don’t pay your whole year’s council tax within seven days of being required to do so, the council may take legal action to get the council tax you owe.

Should you fall into financial difficulty, you should contact your council as a matter of urgency to discuss your case. They will be best placed to assess your circumstances and, if appropriate, to work with you to agree an affordable payment plan. Failing to do so can lead to an escalation of enforcement practices which carry additional changes and penalties. These are detailed below.

Legal demands for payment

Your council can ask a magistrate for a ‘liability order’ if you owe them council tax. This is a legal demand for payment. The council’s costs for arranging this may be added to the money you owe. You can go to the court and give your reasons for not paying.

If you receive a liability order you should speak to your council or your local Citizens Advice about your options.

If you still don’t pay

Your council can get your employer to pay your unpaid council tax directly from your wages.

Your council can also apply to take money from the following benefits:

- Employment and Support Allowance,
- Income Support,
- Jobseeker’s Allowance,
- Pension Credit,
- Universal Credit

If this means you don’t have enough money to pay other bills, you can ask your council if you can make smaller payments. Your council doesn’t have to agree but will usually try to make an arrangement with you.

Bailiffs

If there’s no other way to recover your debt, your council can use bailiffs (enforcement agents) to seize your belongings to cover the value of your

council tax debt. They'll tell you how much you owe before the bailiff visits you. The bailiffs' costs will be added to the total amount you owe the council.

Court

Your council can take you to court if you don't pay the money you owe and the bailiffs can't recover enough property to cover it.

The court will consider whether you:

- can afford to pay the bill
- have a valid reason to not pay

You can be sent to prison for up to three months if the court decides you refused to pay your council tax without good reason.

If the court decides you have something to pay back, you may be able to make an arrangement to pay your debt over time.

How to contest a council tax bill

You should tell your council immediately if you think that:

- your home shouldn't be charged council tax;
- the bills are being sent to the wrong person for your home;
- the amount being charged is wrong;
- the council has not reduced the bill even though a disabled person lives there; or
- it has not applied a discount or exemption to which you are entitled.

You can't appeal just because you think your council tax bill is too expensive.

You should write to the council who issued the bill, saying why you think it is wrong. The council will decide that the bill is either wrong, in which case they will send you a new one, or correct, in which case they should explain why.

If the council decides your bill is wrong, you must continue to pay the amounts listed in your original bill until the new bill arrives. The council has two months to reply.

If you disagree with the council's decision

If you think the council's decision is wrong, or you don't hear back within two months, you can appeal to the Valuation Tribunal. The Valuation Tribunal is independent of the council. You do not have to pay to submit an appeal, but you will have to pay for your own costs. You must appeal in writing within:

- two months of the council telling you its decision,
- four months of you first writing to the council (if you haven't had a response)

If the tribunal agrees with you, the council will update your bill and adjust your monthly payments. Any overpayments that may have been made will be reflected in your new monthly payments. You may also be entitled to a refund, for example if the Valuation Tribunal finds that your property should have been exempt from council tax. The Valuation Tribunal can be contacted on: 0300 123 2035.

Council tax fraud

It is a criminal offence to try to avoid paying council tax by giving false information to the council, or by not telling them about any changes that might affect how much council tax is due. If you feel that your circumstances have changed and that might mean your council tax bill needs to be adjusted, contact your council.

Examples of the different kinds of council tax fraud could include:

- Providing false or incorrect information when applying for council tax support.
- Failing to advise of a change in your income or circumstances that might affect the level of support or discount you are entitled to.
- Claiming a single person discount when other adults are living at the property.
- Claiming a student exemption when not enrolled on a course of full-time education, or not declaring that non-students are living in the property.
- Giving false information to claim a discount, exemption or other reduction.
- Not telling the council when a discount or other reduction should be cancelled.

Where fraud is discovered, councils will always try and get the money back that's been overpaid and consider whether further action is appropriate. Further action could include a caution, an administrative penalty, being denied current or future reductions, or being prosecuted.

Making a complaint

If you wish to raise a complaint about how a council has dealt with an issue, you should, in the first case, raise a complaint using the council's own complaints process. Details of how to do this will be on the council's website. If you are not satisfied with the council's response, and you have allowed the council a reasonable opportunity (usually about 12 weeks) for the matter to be dealt with, you can refer a complaint to the Local Government Ombudsman.

You should ensure that any complaint to the Local Government Ombudsman is made within a year of you knowing about the problem, and that it specifies how the issue affected you personally, or caused an injustice. Find out more at: https://www.lgo.org.uk/.

Having your say on what you pay

Who sets your council tax?

Council tax is set by over 9,000 local councils. 400 of these are larger councils and other types of authority such as police and crime commissioners which provide most of your local services. The rest are town and parish councils which deliver services at community level.

Your council tax bill lists the local authorities which charge council tax in your area and could include a combination of the following:

Billing authorities

Billing authorities run the council tax system at local level, including issuing bills and collecting payments. They should always be your first port of call if you wish to discuss your bill.

Depending on where you live in England, your billing authority will be one of the following:

- Shire district council

- Metropolitan district council
- Unitary authority
- London borough (including the City of London)
- The Council of the Isles of Scilly

All billing authorities comprise members who are elected by the public according to the cycle of local elections set out in law.

Major 'precepting' authorities

These cover a large geographical area and usually include several billing authority areas. Their council tax is collected by billing authorities and passed over to them by instalments throughout the year. Depending on where you live in England you may be charged council tax by one of more of the following:

- County council
- Police and crime commissioner
- Fire and rescue authority
- The Greater London Authority
- Combined authority mayors

Members of county councils and the London Assembly are elected by the public according to the cycle of local elections set out in law. Police and crime commissioners, the Greater London Mayor and combined authority mayors are also directly elected. Most fire and rescue authorities comprise elected members from various local councils who have been nominated to serve on the authority. However, a number of fire authorities are now the responsibility of police and crime commissioners, or – in Greater Manchester - the directly elected mayor.

Local 'precepting' authorities

These usually cover a small geographical area – for example a village or town. Their council tax is collected by billing authorities and passed over to them by instalments throughout the year. Depending on where you live in England you may be charged council tax by one of the following:

- Town council
- Parish council or meeting
- Charter trustee
- The Sub-Treasurer of the Inner Temple and the Under-Treasurer of the Middle Temple (City of London only)

Members of town and parish councils are elected by the public according to the cycle of local elections set out in law. Charter trustees comprise elected members from various local councils who have been nominated to serve as trustees. The Temples have the right to appoint their own Sub- and Under-Treasurers.

How do they set your council tax?

Consultation and scrutiny

Between December and February every year each council will prepare its budget and council tax, incorporating the outcome of local consultation.

The process of determining the budget and council tax of billing and major precepting authorities is overseen by the Chief Finance Officer, reporting to the Chief Executive and members of the authority. The Chief Finance Officer has a duty to advise on the viability of the budget.

Billing authorities and county councils prepare their budget and council tax through their committee or cabinet structures before submitting them to the full elected council for approval. When seeking approval, the vote of every member of the council is recorded for the public record.

Other authorities have different processes for setting their budget and council tax. Directly elected police and crime commissioners prepare a budget and council tax for scrutiny by a police and crime panel of local councillors and other co-opted members before finalising it. Most fire and rescue authorities prepare the budget and council tax through committees before approving it at a meeting of the whole authority.

The directly elected Greater London Mayor and combined authority mayors across England have their own approaches to budget and council tax setting, with scrutiny and challenge being offered by the London Assembly and combined authorities respectively.

Town and parish councils do not have a Chief Finance Officer but set their budget and council tax in a broadly similar way, with the town or parish clerk making the necessary preparations and the full council approving the final proposals.

Your right to vote on excessive increases

Voters in England have the right to the final say on excessive increases in council tax, through the democratic check of a local referendum.

The level at which a council tax increase is excessive and subject to a referendum is measured by increases in the authority's average band D council tax when compared to the previous year. The referendum limit is decided and published each year by the Secretary of State following public consultation, and must be approved by the House of Commons.

A referendum applies to increases in council tax set by individual authorities and not to the increase in your bill as a whole. This is because local authorities are responsible for setting their own element of the council tax bill and not the overall amount charged. Different referendum limits may be set for different types of local authority to reflect their circumstances.

Referendum limits have been set every year for all types of authority except combined authority mayors and town and parish councils. However, the Secretary of State reserves the right to set limits for these authorities in future.

If an authority sets an excessive increase you will be notified on your council tax bill. A referendum must be held no later than the first Thursday in May, the usual date of local council elections. The referendum is organised by billing authorities given their existing responsibility for local elections. The referendum is paid for by the authority which triggered it.

Information must be made available to voters to help them understand the reason for the referendum and the potential impact of its outcome.

The referendum question asks voters to approve or reject the increase. If voters reject the increase then the authority must set a council tax level below the referendum threshold. Authorities may then issue new bills to council tax payers, provide a refund at the end of the year or offer a credit against future bills. However, if a taxpayer asks for a refund, they must receive it.

Your right to vote in local elections

The people who run your local council(s) are elected by you in local elections. This will typically happen once every four years, although some local authorities have their elections more frequently.

The different local authority elections will generally take place at different times over a four year cycle. For example, in a two-tier area you might vote for your district council, and then for your county council two years later. Or in London, you will vote for your London borough, and then the Mayor of London and London Assembly two years later.

The local elections are your opportunity to vote for or against your local representatives, based on the decisions they have taken or promise to take on local taxes and local spending. This gives you a direct say on the people who set your council tax bill.

Other sources of advice

The following websites provide helpful additional information about council tax and understanding your bill and challenging things that you think may be wrong. Most councils also offer useful advice on their websites, including details of how to contact them to discuss your council tax bill.

Citizens Advice - https://www.citizensadvice.org.uk/housing/council-tax/council-tax/
Age UK - https://www.ageuk.org.uk/information-advice/money-legal/income-tax/ways-to-reduce-council-tax/
Money Saving Expert - https://www.moneysavingexpert.com/news/tag/council-tax/
Valuation Office Agency - https://www.gov.uk/government/organisations/valuation-office-agency
Valuation Tribunal - https://www.valuationtribunal.gov.uk/
Check your council tax band - https://www.gov.uk/council-tax-bands